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Great World Religions: Hinduism

Course Guidebook

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Professor Muesse was a tutor in the Study of Religion at Harvard College, a teaching fellow at Harvard Divinity School, and an instructor at the University of Southern Maine, where he later served as Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. In 1988, he became Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. He is now an Associate Professor at Rhodes and teaches courses in Asian religions and philosophy, modern theology, and religion and sexuality. He is the author of many articles, papers, and reviews in comparative religions and theology and has co-edited a collection of essays entitled *Redeeming Men: Religion and Masculinities*. He is a member of the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Indian Philosophy and Religion.

Professor Muesse has been Visiting Professor at the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, India. He has traveled extensively throughout Asia and has studied at Wat Mahadhatu, Bangkok, Thailand, the Himalayan Yogic Institute, Kathmandu, Nepal, and the Subodhi Institute of Integral Education in Sri Lanka.

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Great World Religions: Hinduism

Scope:

This series is a twelve-part introduction to Hinduism, one of the world's great religions. The lectures are investigations into a variety of important dimensions of Hinduism to answer fundamental questions of interest to serious students of comparative religions. The series moves chronologically through the history of Hinduism—from its earliest precursors through its classical manifestations to its responses to modernity. Along the way, the salient aspects of Hindu life are discussed and placed in historical and theological context.

The first lecture explains some of the problematical issues involved in an academic study of Hinduism. We look at some of the difficulties associated with the fundamental terms of the series, especially the concepts of Hinduism, religion, and India. Beginning with the second lecture, we start our journey through 5,000 years of Hindu history by examining the early cultures that most significantly shaped the development of Hinduism. We make a brief visit to the indigenous culture of northern India, the Indus Valley civilization, before introducing the migration of the Āryans from Central Asia. The Āryans bequeathed to Hinduism its most sacred and authoritative scripture, the Veda. We will explore the world of this text in detail in the third lecture. The fourth lecture moves us from the Vedic period to classical Hinduism. During the classical period, Hinduism generates many of its basic ideas and practices, including the notions of transmigration of the soul and karma. In the fifth and sixth lectures, we discuss the major social arrangements that are established in Hindu culture during its classical phase. The fifth lecture discusses the caste system, and the sixth outlines the different life patterns for men and women. Both social stratification and gender patterns greatly affect the nature of the spiritual life for all Hindus.

In the remaining lectures, we explore the diverse religious and philosophical components of Hinduism. In the seventh lecture, we outline the way of action, the spiritual discipline pursued by the vast majority of Hindus. The path of

action aims to improve an individual's future births through meritorious deeds. We look at several varieties of such action, including ritual, festival, and pilgrimage. The eighth lecture is about the way of wisdom, a much less traversed pathway to ultimate salvation that is demanding and rigorous. Gaining wisdom means to see the unity of the soul and ultimate reality and to live one's life accordingly. The ninth lecture, "Seeing God," provides a transition between the discussions of the way of wisdom and the way of devotion. These are different paths that involve very different conceptions of the divine reality. The purpose of this lecture is to explain how such divergent views can coexist with the Hindu tradition. The lecture shows how Hinduism can be both monotheistic and polytheistic and explains the function of images in Hindu worship. In the 10th lecture, we explore the way of devotion through one of the most important and best-loved Hindu texts, the *Bhagavad-gītā*. The 11th lecture concerns devotion to the Goddess and surveys her many manifestations in the Hindu pantheon; it also investigates some of the theory and practice of Tantra, a yogic discipline associated with the Goddess. The 12th lecture concludes the series by discussing Hinduism in the modern era, focusing on Hinduism and the West. We will explore the Hindu-Muslim relationship, describe the British Raj and the Indian Independence movement led by Gandhi, and mention examples of Hindu missions to the West. ■

Hinduism in the World and the World of Hinduism

Lecture 1

Hinduism is the dominant religion of India, ... about 85 percent of the over one billion persons living in India are known to the world as Hindus. Hinduism is, by any measure, one of the world's great religions.

Undertaking the study of any religious tradition requires initial reflection on the nature of the subject and the methods by which it is examined. These considerations are especially important when one begins the study of Hinduism, a very old and highly complex religion. This inaugural lecture describes how Hinduism will be studied in this series. We begin by examining the words “Hinduism,” “religion,” and “India,” discussing why they are problematic yet useful for the study of our subject. Then, we set forth the basic approach and scope of the series, which will be both chronological and thematic. Finally, we reflect on the essential qualities of Hinduism and how the diversity of the Indian context has shaped its development.

The study of Hinduism is more complex and challenging than it might seem at first, as will become evident when we carefully examine the terms “Hinduism,” “religion,” and “India.” These three terms do not come from the indigenous languages of India. Each concept is a linguistic construction, deriving from the vocabularies of those outside of India. Those who spoke of “India” and “Hindus” were often the ones who sought to conquer and subdue the South Asian subcontinent and its inhabitants. These concepts also suggest a uniformity that does not apply to the reality they name.

The concepts of “Hindu” and “Hinduism” are problematic for several reasons. “Hindu” and “Hinduism” are words of Persian origin from the 12th century C.E.; thus, they are not native to India. Initially, they referred simply to “Indians” and were not intended to designate religion. The phrase that more closely approximates what Westerners call Hinduism is *sanātana dharma*, which may be translated as “eternal religion.” Though scholars have debated its accuracy and usefulness, the term “Hinduism” can function as a useful concept if used with caution.

The concept of religion is a relatively recent Western concept, derived from the Latin term *religio*, whose meaning has changed considerably over the centuries of its use. Early in European history, “religion” meant such things as piety or faith in God or was used to designate ritual ceremonies, especially of those whose beliefs were different from one’s own. A stable meaning for the word as a system for belief and doctrine does not appear until the 17th century. Even in the 21st century, the word “religion” lacks precision of usage, because we do not have universal agreement about what constitutes religion. Though it cannot be easily discarded, the term “religion” must be used carefully, with an awareness

India has more than 1 billion people, deriving from a host of racial and ethnic stocks and speaking 16 major languages and hundreds of dialects for an estimated 850 languages in daily use.

of its limitations. Those limitations particularly pertaining to the study of Hinduism include a Western understanding of the concept as an aspect of life that occurs in a specific time and place, or something centered in a set of doctrines and beliefs or associated with religious institutions. Hinduism is not a part or aspect of Indian life or culture; it is far more encompassing than that. It structures and influences every aspect of Hindu life, including arts, music, medicine, and the like, which may explain the lack of a specific self-referential term.

The conception of “India” is also a problematic one. We need to recognize that we may perceive our subject with the preconceptions offered to us by Western culture. India is seen as exotic, rich, and different, a land of deep spirituality and mysticism. Such romantic notions do not fit the reality of India. The idea of “India” also suggests greater cohesiveness and unity than is the case. India is a land of great diversity and extremes—socially, religiously, economically, and geographically—one of the few places on earth where diversity is preserved and appreciated.

India has more than 1 billion people, deriving from a host of racial and ethnic stocks and speaking 16 major languages and hundreds of dialects for an estimated 850 languages in daily use. India is also one of the most

religiously pluralistic of all places in the world. Besides the Hindus, who make up the great majority, there are Muslims in northern India (and Pakistan and Bangladesh) comprising 10 percent of the Indian population; Sikhism, a religious tradition concentrated in the region known as the Punjab, forms 2 percent of the populace; Christians comprise about 2 percent; Buddhists make up a smaller contingent, though the tradition originated and flourished for centuries in India; and other smaller groups include Jains, Jews, and Parsis, practitioners of the ancient Persian religion Zoroastrianism. These various ethnicities, languages, and religions call attention to the deeply pluralistic context in which Hinduism is rooted and support the contention that “India” is not an easily grasped concept. ■

Essential Reading

Klostermaier, Klaus. *A Survey of Hinduism*, chapter 1.

Supplemental Reading

Muesse, chapter 26 in McCutcheon, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, pp. 390–394.

Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, chapters 1–3.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you consider to be the defining characteristic of religion? What distinguishes religion from other domains of culture?
2. What images and ideas do you associate with India? Hinduism?

The Early Cultures of India

Lecture 2

The discovery of the Indus Valley civilization in the 19th century revealed a sophisticated and long-forgotten ancient culture that appears to have contributed significantly to the development of Hinduism.

Hinduism is the world's oldest living religious tradition with roots deep in the early cultures of India. These ancient cultures, the most important of which were the Indus Valley civilization and the Āryan society, combined to create a highly diverse family of religions and philosophies. Perhaps the only thing this medley of perspectives shares is the attitude of tolerance for others who believe and practice differently.

The Indus Valley civilization was a highly sophisticated ancient society in North India (now Pakistan) that had been long forgotten until it was discovered in the 1850's. Most evidence we have about the Indus Valley civilization is based on archaeological findings, because the cryptic language of the people has yet to be deciphered. We do not even know what the civilization's inhabitants called themselves. Archaeological evidence indicates that the civilization flourished between 3000–1500 B.C.E. Some 70 cities have been unearthed, displaying a high degree of organization and central planning. The entire civilization may have spanned as much as 1 million square kilometers, and some cities may have had populations of as many as 40,000 inhabitants. Mohenjo-daro and Harappā appear to be the most important cities. Harappā was evidently the capital city, and the civilization is sometimes referred to as the “Harappān culture.” The Indus Valley civilization was a relatively peaceful culture because few real weapons have been discovered.

Like many pre-modern cultures, the Indus Valley civilization seems to have been greatly concerned with ritual purity. A great concern with cleanliness is evidenced throughout the civilization; not only homes, but also municipalities, featured sophisticated bathing and toilet facilities. Mohenjo-daro and Harappā each had a large central bath with public access, which antedate similar Roman facilities by many centuries. The prominence of these baths in homes and cities suggests that dwellers of the Indus Valley civilization

were greatly interested in matters of ritual purity (not to be confused with the idea of physical hygiene). One of the most common ways for societies to maintain structures of order is by the opposition of cleanliness and dirtiness, or more technically, purity and pollution. Foods, people, and activities might be thought of as clean or dirty, and this is often a function of context rather than the intrinsic nature of the thing or activity.

Excavation of the Indus Valley civilization has revealed many intriguing artifacts that scholars use to extrapolate ideas about the Indus Valley religion. The most interesting of these relics are seals used to stamp soft clay with images, which most scholars believe to be in some way connected to fertility rituals. This belief is based on the fact that the great majority of seals portray male animals with emphasized horns and flanks, suggesting an intense interest in sexuality and reproductive function. Depictions of the sexual energies of animals, as we find in the Indus Valley seals, may suggest a human effort to appropriate animal powers that humans lacked or wanted in greater abundance. Whereas male sexuality in this society is symbolized by animals, the discovery of numerous terracotta figurines depicting human females suggests that the reproductive powers of women were revered and regarded as sacred. These figures, and others like them, lead some scholars to theorize the existence of a vast Mother Goddess religion long antedating the worship of male gods. Also indicating interest in sexuality are a great number of stone and clay phallic artifacts, called *lingams*, found throughout the Indus Valley. Similar images still play a prominent role in the worship of the god Śiva, whose creative energies are symbolized by the *lingam* and its female counterpart, the *yoni*. Another seal illustrates a man sitting in what appears to be a meditating pose, suggesting that some dwellers on the Indus Valley may have been practitioners of yoga and introspection. The seated figure seems to have three faces pointing in different directions and a headdress of horns, leading many scholars to believe that it may be an early likeness of the god later known as Śiva.

Scholars mounted the theory that the Indus civilization came to an end around 1500 B.C.E. when the Āryans ventured into the Indian subcontinent from Central Asia and conquered the Indus dwellers, but today this “invasion theory” is in serious doubt. The Indus civilization was already in decline by 1500 when the Āryans supposedly subdued the region by military conquest.

There is no evidence, archaeological or otherwise, to suggest a massive Āryan conquest. Evidence does exist, however, that the Āryans and the Indus dwellers may have coexisted in the same area for some time before the demise of the Indus Valley culture.

The Āryans were different from what we know about the Indus Valley dwellers in many ways. Unlike the Indus Valley people, the Āryans were not highly organized; they were pastoral nomads rather than settled agriculturalists. They used horses and chariots and were skilled in the use of bronze, which initially gave credence to the “invasion theory” of the Indus Valley’s demise. Their language became “Sanskrit,” which means “well-formed,” and it became the “official” language of the Hindu tradition. The Āryans believed it to be the perfect linguistic embodiment of the nature of reality. Sanskrit is closely connected to many European languages. The migratory Āryans left little in the way of archaeological evidence, and thus, almost everything we know about them is based on what is now a collection of writings called the Veda, now the oldest and most sacred of Hindu scriptures.

The wisdom embodied in the Veda is believed to be timeless and without origin, existing before this world and embodying an eternal law that transcends the gods.

Originally and for thousands of years, the Veda existed only in an oral tradition preserved by special memorization techniques by Āryan priests who considered writing it down to be a desecration. The Āryan emphasis on spoken language meant that the oral word, as contrasted with the written word, was extremely powerful and potentially dangerous. Only the priests were competent enough to recite the Veda effectively without causing grave danger. Finally put in writing by the priestly class after the arrival of the Muslims in India, the contents of the Veda were still not divulged to Westerners until the late 18th and 19th centuries.

Not a narrative like the Bible, the Veda is more like a liturgy manual, including hundreds of hymns addressed to various Āryan deities; some

myths, incantations, and spells; and a bit of philosophical speculation; but the Veda was concerned primarily with rituals and was probably composed to be recited at sacrifices. “Veda” means wisdom. The wisdom embodied in the Veda is believed to be timeless and without origin, existing before this world and embodying an eternal law that transcends the gods. The words of the Veda, according to traditional conviction, were revealed to ancient seers called *rishis* in the great, distant past. The Veda is so important that Hinduism is sometimes called *Vaidik dharma*, the religion of the Veda. Yet the Veda has never been widely read by most Hindus. ■

Supplemental Reading

Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, chapters 1–2.

Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*, chapter 1.

Questions to Consider

1. How is the Indus Valley civilization, such as we know it, similar to—or different from—other ancient cultures with which you are familiar?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of oral scripture, such as the Veda?

The World of the Veda

Lecture 3

Although the idea of an Āryan conquest of India is now disputed, the influence of the Āryans on Indian religion is undeniable. Our guide to these investigations is the rich collection of Āryan texts known as the Veda, today regarded by Hindus as their most sacred and authoritative scripture.

When the Āryans came to India, they brought with them the Veda, an oral tradition of knowledge composed in Sanskrit and principally concerned with ritual. The Veda represents the perspective of the priestly class in Āryan society; we cannot be certain how widespread these views were. The Veda is divided into four *Samhitās*, or “collections;” each deals with a different aspect of ritual: *Rig-veda*, *Yajur-veda*, *Sama-veda*, and *Atharva-veda*. The oldest and most important of these collections contains more than a thousand songs to various gods and goddesses and is aptly named the *Rig*, meaning “praise.” Scholars believe it was composed between 2300 and 1200 B.C.E. The *Rig-veda* contains *mantras*, or sacred words, used during ritual. We will explore the Vedic understandings of three areas: the physical world, the divine world, and the human world.

Āryan views of the natural world were in some ways similar to those of other ancient cultures and in some ways, different. Like many ancient cultures, the Āryans thought of the world as divided into three levels. They used the term *triloka*, or “the three places,” to refer to the earth, “mid-space,” and Svarga, the home of the gods and the ancestors. The world was believed to be governed by an abstract, impersonal principle of harmony and order called *Rita*, which kept the universe intact and preserved unity. *Rita* also regulated moral order and the order of ritual. The Veda offered several different stories of the world’s creation, and it does not seem to have been a problem that these were sometimes at odds with one another. Even today, the Hindu traditions contain dozens of differing creation accounts.

One example of a Vedic cosmogonic hymn opens by taking us to the limits of our capacity to think, thrusting us beyond conventional dualities by invoking

a time that is no time, a place that is no place. A “life force” is identified, a power that came into being through *tapas*, a creative energy associated with the god Agni and manifested by meditators in deep concentration. Taking an unexpected turn, the hymn becomes profoundly humble and refreshingly honest in its concluding verses. Without reaching a point of nihilism or cynicism, it merely reminds us that all such thoughts about the origins of the cosmos remain speculative.

The gods of the Vedic tradition are many and varied, and they are conceptualized differently from Western notions of gods. There are about 20 different Sanskrit terms for the English word “god.” The most commonly used is *deva*, which means “shiny” and “exalted.” A *deva* is a divine being or supernatural power but not necessarily an omniscient or omnipotent being. *Devas* are not moral exemplars or lawgivers. Created after the world, they are subject to its laws, including the law of *Rita*. The traditional number of Vedic *devas* is 33. Various *devas* dwell in different parts of the *triloka*, and

most have specific divine functions associated with nature, war, and communal order.

Indra, a god of war, is the most important *deva* in the Veda.

One-quarter of the more than a thousand songs in the *Rig-veda* are composed in his honor.

In the pantheon of Vedic gods, some are more important than others; to demonstrate the range of Vedic theology, we will discuss some of the more interesting primary

devas. Indra, a god of war, is the most important *deva* in the Veda. One-quarter of the more than a thousand songs in the *Rig-veda* are composed in his honor. Next to Indra in popularity is the *deva* Agni, the divine fire. Nearly one-fifth of the songs of the *Rig-veda* are addressed to Agni, who is unique among *devas* in that he dwells in all three levels of the world. Because of his mobility, Agni was mediator between the gods and humans, carrying sacrifices to the gods and transporting the dead to Svarga. *Varuna* was custodian of *Rita*, the principle of order that he enforced but did not create. The *deva* Soma manifested as a particular plant whose juices were used in rituals. Soma induced ecstatic experiences for those who imbibed it. The *deva* Rudra, known as “the Howler,” despised human beings and often afflicted them with sickness and misfortune, but he was also a healer.

Minor *devas* included Yama, the god of death; Ushas, the goddess of the dawn; Kubera, the *deva* of wealth and prosperity; *Sūrya*, god of the sun, and other lesser gods and goddesses. At different times in the Vedic religion, different *devas* took center stage. Max Müller, a 19th-century Vedic scholar, coined the term “henotheism” to describe the practice of recognizing many gods and goddesses while worshiping one as supreme, a sort of synthesis of polytheism and monotheism.

The Veda regarded humans as being individual souls and members of a stratified society. For the Āryans, the essence of human life is the soul, which they associated with the breath, designated by the word *ātman*. The Sanskrit *ātman* has cognates in the English word “atmosphere” and the German word *atmen*, which means “to breathe.” Because the breath leaves the body when a person dies, the Āryans concluded that the breath is what animates and

For the Āryans, the essence of human life is the soul, which they associated with the breath. ... Because the breath leaves the body when a person dies, the Āryans concluded that the breath is what animates and enlivens the body.

enlivens the body. There is not complete agreement in the Veda about ultimate human destiny. Some Vedic hymns suggest that the soul traveled to heaven. Some indicate that the soul descends to the “house of clay,” the underworld ruled by the god of death. Still others imagine that the soul dissolves along with the body.

When the Āryans arrived in the Indian subcontinent, their society was probably already stratified according to occupations. Priests and teachers were the Brahmins; the warriors and administrators were the Kṣatriyas; and

the merchants, artisans, ranchers, and farmers were the Vaiśyas. The later Veda also mentioned a fourth class of people called Śūdras, who were the people of the land. Evidence for the stratification of Āryan society comes from the “Sacrifice of the Purusha,” a hymn about the ritual dismemberment of the Purusha, the primordial human. From the Purusha, the gods created the various components of the world and four classes of human beings. This myth roots the division of social classes into the very nature of the world. To



Ganges River.

attempt to upset or disorder social classification is to oppose what is natural and divinely appointed and to invite cosmic chaos. The myth also establishes a system of correspondences linking the natural and social worlds together with ritual. ■

Essential Reading

O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*, "Creation," "Agni," "Soma," "Indra," "Varuna," "Rudra and Vishnu."

Supplemental Reading

Mahony, William K. *The Artful Universe*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do the Vedas compare and contrast to other scriptural traditions among the world's religions?
2. What purposes are served by conceiving the great forces in life as personal beings?

From the Vedic Tradition to Classical Hinduism

Lecture 4

The Āryans, like most religious people throughout the world even today, considered ritual much more important than doctrine and belief. The Veda itself was a manual of ritual, not of creedal statements or theology.

This talk discusses the emergence of classical Hinduism and its characteristic views. We begin by examining the central place of ritual in Āryan life and discussing the different types of rituals, their purposes, and their performers. We also study the Āryans' understanding of how ritual worked. In the central centuries of the first millennium B.C.E., the religious life of India underwent some remarkable changes that raised doubts about the time-honored Vedic tradition. These doubts, along with new speculation about the nature and destiny of humanity, spurred the emergence of Hinduism. We shall see how Indian philosophers came to regard the human as an immortal soul encased in a perishable body and bound by action, or *karma*, to a cycle of endless existences. When this view of human destiny is widely accepted in India, it constitutes a new problem for religion.

The Āryans' strong emphasis on ritual over doctrine and belief was the basis of the Vedic tradition. The re-evaluation of ritual, however, spurred the development of the classical period of Hindu history. The Veda has certain conceptions and assumptions about the world, divinity, and humanity, and these dimensions are united in the practice of ritual. The Āryans practiced three types of rituals: domestic, shamanic, and *śrauta*. Though little is known about domestic rituals, they were probably simple sacrifices at home fires with the father serving as priest to honor the gods and ensure their generosity. Shamanic rituals from the *Atharva-veda* were performed by a ritual specialist called an *Atharvan* for Āryan families at times of crisis (such as sickness), during transition (such as birth or death), or on significant days (such as the new moon or the harvest). The most important rituals for Āryan religious life may have been the *śrauta* rites, particularly the fire sacrifice. Much of

the Veda concerned these elaborate rituals. They were performed exclusively by Brahmins and promised earthly rewards, such as prosperity, health and longevity, and reproductive success. The sacred words of the Veda came to be regarded as powerful in themselves because language was believed to embody spirit. The creative power of sacrifice acquired the name “Brahman.” One Vedic creation myth maintained that the universe was created out of a word—AUM, the *Prāṇava*, or most potent of mantras.

Transformations of thought in the Axial Age (c. 800–200 B.C.E.) led to the re-evaluation of Vedic ritual and novel ideas about the nature of human existence. Deeper spiritual questions led to the examination of human nature and the possibility of an afterlife. This evolution in Indian religion was roughly contemporaneous with similar developments in other civilizations, including ancient Greece, China, Mesopotamia, and Israel. The function of religion changed from that of “cosmic maintenance” to one of personal enlightenment and transformation.

Ways of addressing new issues were combined with older Vedic practices to create classical Hinduism. Two features of classical Hinduism that distinguish it from its Vedic precursor were the concepts of the transmigration of the soul and *karma*. A fundamental principle of virtually all religions formed in India, reincarnation, or transmigration of the soul, is the belief that human souls are reborn into another physical form after they die. Its origin is uncertain. Modes of reincarnation involve returning in different forms—human, animal, or even demon—and the form is determined by the level of one’s karma. Karma is simply action and its consequences; in older Vedic times, it meant “ritual action,” but in classical Hinduism, it came to include “moral action.” The moral connotation implied that karma can be good and evil. Good karma counts toward a favorable rebirth in which one improves his or her station in the next life. Bad karma counts toward an unfavorable rebirth in which one lowers his or her station in the next life. Karma can be difficult to conceptualize. Jainism thinks of karma as a fine, imperceptible substance that clings to the soul. In classical Hinduism, the notion of karma is less materialist and more akin to a form of energy. Karma is a principle of absolute justice that occurs ineluctably and impersonally, like the law of gravity acting on physical bodies. The principle of karma means that eventually everyone gets what he or she deserves because the consequences

of action always return to the agent. The world just described, a cycle of transmigrations governed by the laws of karma, is called *samsāra*, which means, literally, “wandering,” and this condition is the essential problem of life for Hindus. ■

Essential Reading

Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, chapter 5, section 1.

Supplemental Reading

Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*, chapter 2.

Questions to Consider

1. What factors may have spurred such a widespread ferment in religious and philosophical thought in the Axial Age?
2. Why did the idea of transmigration of the soul, so important to religions of India, not appear in any major Western religion?

Caste

Lecture 5

Dharma is one of those difficult-to-translate notions that have various meanings and associations, so I prefer to leave it untranslated. In the present context, dharma means the pattern for proper and appropriate living. It is, in other words, the moral law.

In addition to new ideas about human life, classical Hinduism is defined by evolving social arrangements. This lecture and the next one, on gender and the life cycle, discuss the social foundations of Hinduism. We shall observe how the relatively simple stratification of Āryan society is transmuted into the exceedingly complex caste system. Spurred by the dynamics that prompted speculation about the nature and destiny of human beings, what was once a division of labor became more deeply embedded into the social and religious fabric. Rules regulating appropriate behavior within and between castes were developed and joined to the emerging ideas about the soul. These regulations had—and have—tremendous impact on Hindu social life, governing not only one's work but also such matters as marriage, diet, and hygiene.

During the transition from the Vedic tradition to classical Hinduism, the concept of *dharma* evolves, and the caste system becomes more deeply established in Hindu life. Distinctions between good and bad karma are determined by dharma, which, like the Vedic idea of *Rita*, has both moral and cosmological dimensions. The cosmological element implies that the moral order is rooted in the nature of reality, not on human whim. Dharma as a moral principle was rather abstract and required concretization to be applicable to people's daily lives. Accordingly, the genre of literature known as *dharma-śāstras* emerged to specify and codify the dharma. The most important and influential representative of the *dharma-śāstras*, the *Laws of Manu*, was written down about the time of Jesus but reflected earlier understandings of society's structure. Manu's laws assigned different dharmas to each stratum of Hindu society.

The Hindu caste system is an extremely complex phenomenon, at once social, economic, political, and religious. The caste system was founded on the Vedic stratification of society and acquired its characteristic features during the classical period of Hinduism. The caste system is based on the assumption that all people are not created equal; they are born with innate differences derived from how they acted in previous lives. This is the law of karma. Caste entails both a division of labor and a hierarchy of spiritual purity. It is not based on wealth.

The term “caste” is not an indigenous Hindu word but, rather, a Portuguese expression that imprecisely refers to what Hindus call *varna* and *jātī*, which are two distinguishable but related systems of organizing India society. *Varna*

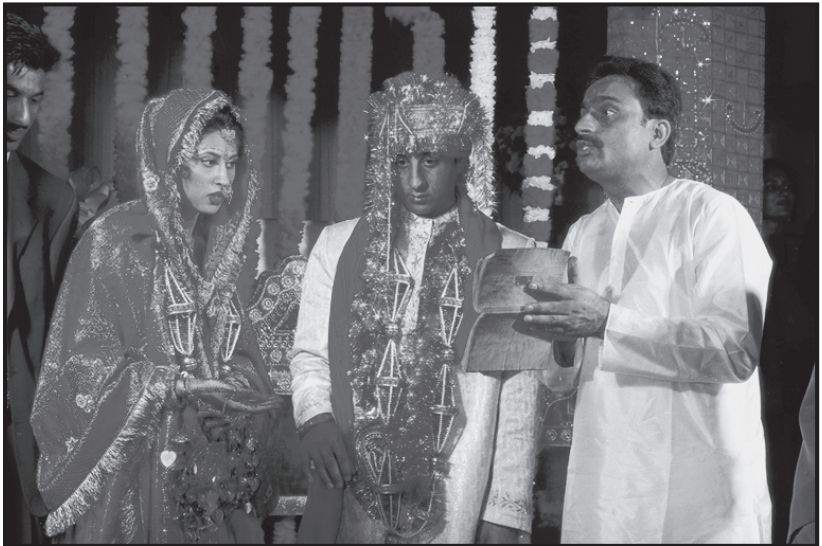
means color. *Varna* is often thought of as “caste.” *Jātī* means birth and, more specifically, birth group. *Jātī* is thought of as “subcaste.”

Caste entails both a division of labor and a hierarchy of spiritual purity. It is not based on wealth.

The *varna* system is the division of labor composed of the four categories of Āryan society. The Brahmins, priests, and intellectuals

are at the top of the purity hierarchy. They are followed by the Kśatriyas, the warriors and administrators. The Vaiśyas—merchants, farmers, and artisans—come next. Finally are the Śūdras, the peasants or common folk. The first three castes are known as the “twice-born,” because as children, their members undergo a ritual second birth. Śūdras, however, have no such ritual initiation and are known as the “once-born.”

Outside of the *varna* system completely are those who have no caste, known variously as “outcastes,” “untouchables,” and “Hari-jans.” Members of this group today prefer to call themselves *dalits*, meaning the “oppressed ones” or “those ground down.” People in this class are handlers of leather, morticians and body-burners, toilet cleaners, scavengers, and so on. Their ritual impurity cannot be removed by standard procedures of purification, such as bathing, because their work is considered highly polluting, yet they perform the crucial function of absorbing the pollution of Hindu society. “Untouchables” live outside of villages and towns and cannot use the same public facilities as



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Rules regulating appropriate behavior within and between castes were developed. These regulations had—and have—tremendous impact on Hindu social life, governing not only one’s work but also such matters as marriage.

caste members. Though technically outlawed by the constitution, the practice of untouchability remains a part of daily Hindu life.

In addition to *varna*, the caste system is made up a large number of *jātīs*, or “birth groups,” existing within the larger *varna* groupings. As this name implies, one’s subcaste is determined by birth, and it cannot be left except under rare circumstances. Unlike the *varnas*, which are pan-Hindu, *jātīs* are local groups; therefore, their total number has not been determined with certainty. Estimates suggest that there may be more than 3,000. There are hundreds of *jātīs* ranked within each *varna*, and local ranking is not always the same. Although little or no individual social mobility exists in the caste system, there is some mobility for subcastes as a whole, if their members attempt to gain a greater standing by imitating the behavior of higher castes. There is much scholarly speculation on the relationship between *varna* and *jātīs*. Many believe that *jātīs* were indigenous to the Indus Valley civilization, and *varna* were superimposed by the Āryans.

In addition to occupation, caste also determines many other facets of everyday life, based on the dynamics of purity and pollution. One's caste and subcaste imply marital restrictions. People are expected to marry within their caste, and although men cannot marry up-caste, women can in special cases. Caste determines the kinds of food one may eat. For example, high-caste Brahmins maintain strict vegetarian diets, whereas meat may be acceptable at lower caste levels where ritual purity is less of a concern. Caste also determines the kinds of people from whom one may receive food and with whom one may eat. Caste determines the type of people with whom one can associate or whom one may touch. Caste strictures are ordinarily enforced by family and intra-caste pressure, not by upper castes enforcing rules on lower castes. Most castes have caste councils in which the interests of the caste are discussed and advanced.

The dharma of each caste carries certain specific duties and responsibilities. According to the *Laws of Manu*, the duties of the Brahmin include teaching, studying, sacrificing for himself, sacrificing for others, making gifts, and receiving gifts. The dharma of the Kṣatriyas is to protect the whole world, both from foreign enemies and by maintaining the caste system to keep social and cosmic order. The dharma for the Vaiśyas includes taking a wife, keeping cattle, and knowing the worth of valuable materials, such as gems, metals, cloth, perfumes, and so on. He must also know how to sow seed and tend a field and be acquainted with weights and measures. Finally, the dharma for the Śūdras involves serving the Brahmins and the other upper castes with humility. Being outside the caste system, the *dalits* do not have their own dharma according to the *Laws of Manu*.

Despite friction between and among castes and subcastes, the caste system in India has made for a highly stable society for more than 2,000 years, mainly because of the system's religious foundations. The concepts of transmigration and karma work to support the idea that one's station in life is the consequence of one's own actions. These concepts function to encourage the individual not to resist the system, but to fulfill the dharma of his or her caste, because in so doing, one's position in the next life is sure to improve. The *Laws of Manu* teach that a breach of caste courts social chaos and ultimate destruction. Finally, Hinduism reminds its practitioners that this world ultimately must be transcended. ■

Essential Reading

Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, chapter 5, sections 2, 4.

Supplemental Reading

Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, chapters 1–2.

Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, introduction, chapters 1–2.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of basing social structure and hierarchy in religious practice? What are the advantages and disadvantages of basing social structure and hierarchy in wealth and fame?
2. Are there any equivalents to the untouchables in Western culture?

Men, Women, and the Stages of Life

Lecture 6

We observed how the development of classical Hinduism led to particular dharmas, or duties, for individuals according to their standing in society. At about the same time in Hindu history, specific expectations also arose concerning one's sex, resulting in different patterns of life for men and women

In addition to caste-specific dharmas, the *Laws of Manu* outlined particular regulations for the lives of men and women and the relationships between them. These basic principles were developed into ideal life patterns for upper-caste men and women. Both ideals were based on the notion of “stages,” a common way of thinking about the individual's life. As ideals, these stages did not necessarily describe the life cycle of each and every member of Hindu society.

According to the stages of life elaborated by Manu, males undergo four orders, or *āśramas*, in their lifetime. These orders begin with *brahmacharya*, or the student stage, in which the boy is initiated into the twice-born through a special ritual signifying his standing as an upper-caste member. The initiate left home to study the Veda and religious rituals with a *guru*, or teacher. After studenthood, a young man entered the householder stage. He was expected to marry, raise a family, pursue an occupation appropriate to his caste, and establish himself as a financially independent and responsible contributor to society. Marriage was regarded as the natural state for adult men and women, from which it would be shameful to deviate. In the forest-dweller stage, a man and possibly his wife moved to a more modest dwelling, usually at the edge of the village near the forest, to become more devoted to the life of the spirit. But this could occur only after a man had raised a family, earned an income, and discharged his obligations to society. *Sannyasa*, or renunciation, was a stage of such rigor and austerity that not all men would embark upon it. Those who did renounced their former identity and everything associated with it: name, wife, family, and all material goods, living out their remaining days as wandering, solitary ascetics.

The female life cycle followed three stages: girlhood, householder, and widowhood, each defined by the male under whose protection the woman was. Girls were not allowed the same education as boys because they could not leave their father's protection. What education girls received came from their parents, such as domestic skills learned from her mother and her role in religious ritual. Marriage marked the female's entrance into the householder stage.

Marriages in India have historically been alliances between families for the purposes of reproduction and economic stability. Because marriages were arranged, bride and groom often did not meet until the actual wedding. Girls married early in life, frequently because of great concern for their virginity; often, they were married to much older men. Following the wedding, the new bride went to live with her husband's family, because the pattern in traditional India is to live in extended families. Upon entering her husband's home, the new bride was expected to defer to and obey her mother-in-law, the mistress of the house.

**A man's wife shared
her husband's karma
and his destiny.**

As a wife, the Hindu woman was expected to live up to the ideals of *strīdharmā*, the duties of the "good wife." A man's wife shared her husband's karma and his destiny. His premature death was often regarded as her responsibility. The husband was expected to provide for his wife's material needs, her security, protection, and social status, revering her as a goddess, as if she were the goddess incarnate. If a woman gave birth to a son, her status was greatly enhanced. Daughters, on the other hand, are still generally considered economic liabilities. A few exceptions to the pattern of marriage and motherhood do exist, such as one 14th-century woman named Lalla who left an unhappy marriage and an abusive mother-in-law to study spiritual disciplines after the fashion of a *bhakta* saint.

The death of her husband was a crisis for every Hindu wife, marking her entrance into the third stage of life. Until recently, one possibility for this stage was *satī*. *Satī*, sometimes called the "going with," is the name for the ritual in which a wife burns alive on her husband's funeral pyre. The term *satī* is taken from a mythic story of *Satī*, one of the wives of the great god Śiva,

who was so faithful to her husband that she was willing to die rather than endure an insult to his dignity. Strong evidence exists that many women were thrown on the burning pyre against their will by their sons or other family members or villagers; in other cases, women were drugged or intoxicated when they performed *satī*. The British outlawed the practice during their rule in the 19th century, and the ritual has since become extremely rare, though cases were reported as recently as 1987 and 2002.

Some women may have chosen *satī* when they considered the alternative; historically, widowhood has been so difficult that even a grisly death might seem preferable. The widow was viewed as dangerous, inauspicious, and the embodiment of all negative qualities in women. Widows were generally not permitted to re-marry, even though women were frequently widowed in their twenties and thirties. They were expected to wear a white sari for the rest of their lives because white is the color of mourning in India. Widows were sometimes expected to shave their heads to be unattractive to men. Widows were given the hardest household tasks to perform and forbidden to eat with the rest of the family.

The roles of Hindu men and women are changing, perhaps more today than ever before in India's history, but social changes in India evolve slowly, because patterns of behavior are etched deeply in the soul of Hindu India. ■

Essential Reading

Radhakrishnan and Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, chapter 5, sections 3, 5.

Supplemental Reading

Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, chapter 1.

Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*, chapter 5.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the social and personal benefits to envisioning the final stage of life as one of renunciation?
2. Are there advantages in making marriage a family decision rather than simply an individual one?

The Way of Action

Lecture 7

The ultimate goal of Hinduism is freedom from *samsāra*.

Classical Hinduism established the central problem of human existence for Hindus—*samsāra*, the cycle of continual transmigrations of the soul. Traditionally, Hinduism has offered three ways to reckon with this problem. This talk focuses on the first of the three ways, the path of action; subsequent lectures will cover the other two. The path of action is the most important religious discipline for the majority of Hindus. The principal feature of this form of spirituality is the performance of meritorious religious deeds, including ritual, festivals, and pilgrimage.

In order to understand how Hindus attain *samsāra*, it has been necessary to gain a clearer understanding of caste and gender, because these matters impinge on the ways one seeks to live the spiritual life. Though some Westerners tend to misinterpret it as desirable, Hindus see *samsāra* as the fundamental problem of life—the realm of suffering, sorrow, and ennui. *Samsāra* implies the possibility of returning to life in forms that are not especially conducive to pleasure, given that many kinds of life, both human and animal, experience great amounts of suffering. Even returning to a life of privilege and pleasure would eventually become tedious and distasteful because forever is a long, long time.

The ultimate goal of Hinduism is, thus, to gain *mokṣa*, meaning release or liberation from *samsāra*, which all persons must eventually achieve. In keeping with the Hindu appreciation of plurality, there is not one single prescribed path to salvation, but several. Traditionally, Hinduism has maintained that there are three ways to live the spiritual life, collectively known as the *Trīmārga*, literally “the three paths.” The three paths are known as the *karma-mārga*, or the way of action; the *jñāna-mārga*, or the way of wisdom; and the *bhakti-mārga*, the way of devotion, and are seen as providing suitable spiritualities for persons of different temperaments or proclivities. The word *yoga* is often used interchangeably with *mārga* to

describe these types. The meaning of the term *yoga* is much broader than simply the Western identification with the discipline of practicing postures.

In a sense, all Hindus pursue the way of action, or *karma-mārga*, in one way or another. For most Hindus, *mokṣa* is seen as a distant objective to be pursued in *another* lifetime, because the concerns of this life are demanding enough, with many this-worldly needs that require attention, such as the necessity of obtaining daily food. The Hindu tradition speaks of four “goods” of life, each of which constitutes a valuable, worthwhile aim in life. First is the good of *dharma*, or duty. The second is the good of *artha*, or wealth and material acquisition. The third is the good of *kāma*, or pleasure and enjoyment of the sense. *Mokṣa* is the fourth and highest good.

Positive karma may also be produced by meritorious religious activity, such as rituals, festivals, and pilgrimages, all important aspects of everyday Hindu life.

To achieve *mokṣa*, one must be willing to give up the other three goods, because even though doing one’s duty and pursuing wealth and enjoyment are viewed positively, they also keep one bound to the wheel of rebirth. For those who are not yet prepared to abandon a life of duty, material acquisition, and enjoyments, the religious life means doing one’s best to improve this life and future lives.

In addition to following the *dharma* prescribed for one’s caste and gender, positive karma may also be produced by meritorious religious activity, such as rituals, festivals, and pilgrimages, all important aspects of everyday Hindu life. Daily rituals are performed, such as uttering the name of a personal deity, engaging in ritual bathing while uttering mantras and applying markings of devotion, making morning prayers, and burning incense in *pūjā* rites; similar rites at noon and evening complete a daily round of devotional rituals. Rites of passage help individuals negotiate the transition to different states of being and provide an opportunity for the community to maintain its solidarity, marking the changes of individuals’ lives with *samskāras*, or sacraments of birth, initiation, marriage, and death. On virtually every day

of the annual calendar, a festival is being celebrated somewhere in India. This multitude of Hindu festivals is, in part, a function of the multitude of Hindu gods (the traditional number of which is supposed to be 330 million). The festivals are also important as events that help integrate the local village community and define the social practices of its residents. Pilgrimage is an important and widely practiced aspect of Hinduism (as it is of Christianity and Islam), not only because pilgrimage is religiously meritorious but also because India itself is holy. The very rivers, mountains, trees, and villages of India are often identified with the gods and important sacred events. Leaving home and making the arduous journey to take *darśan*, or a viewing, of these sacred places is an activity that brings great spiritual benefit.

The way of action, or *karma-mārga*, is an avenue for generating positive karma by following dharma and fulfilling religious obligations and opportunities to steadily improve one's place in life, over the course of many lifetimes, until one is in a position favorable for realizing *mokṣa*. ■



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Bathers in the River Ganges.

Essential Reading

Danielou, Alain. *Virtue: Success, Pleasure & Liberation*.

Supplemental Reading

Eck, *Darśan*, chapter 3.

Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, chapter 6.

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways do holidays and festivals serve the good of a society?
2. What kinds of places serve as pilgrimage sites in Western culture, including locations that are not ordinarily considered religious?

The Way of Wisdom

Lecture 8

Karma, even good karma, keeps a person bound to the cycle of transmigration. One path the Hindu tradition offers for the attainment of *mokṣa*, or ultimate release, is the path of wisdom.

The path of wisdom is rooted in the Axial Age, when the most important Hindu responses to the anxieties about death and rebirth were recorded in a collection of texts called the *Upaniṣads*. The oldest of the *Upaniṣads* was probably composed between 800–400 B.C.E., but actually written down much later. The authors of these works are not known to us today. The *Upaniṣads* are regarded as *śruti*, or revealed knowledge, a sacred status they share with the Veda. Although they were developed much later than the original four *Samhitās*, they represent a perspective often called *Vedānta*, which means the end and completion of the Veda. The title of this collection, the *Upaniṣads*, takes its name from the Sanskrit syllables that mean “to sit down beside,” suggesting that the *Upaniṣads* contain knowledge transmitted from guru to student, indicating an esoteric form of wisdom that could be gained only from someone who knew.

There is not uniform agreement about what works are included in the collection of *Upaniṣads*. According to some, there are as many as 200–300, some written as recently as a few centuries ago; some say that the number is 108, which is a particularly sacred number in Hinduism and Buddhism. Most printed editions and English translations contain 13 “principal” *Upaniṣads*; however, like the Veda, they are not systematic or always internally consistent.

The *Upaniṣads* focused on two central trajectories of thought: What is the essence of this human self, and what is the essence of the ultimate reality? The sages who composed the *Upaniṣads* also called the human essence “soul,” using the Sanskrit word *ātman*, but they found the original Vedic connection to the breath unsatisfying. *Upaniṣadic* authors were also reluctant to identify the human essence with the mind, as had other philosophers. The *Upaniṣads* concluded that what is beyond the senses and the mind itself cannot be

sensed or thought about. From this insight derive the unique qualities of the soul: *ātman* as imperceptible, spiritual, beyond human categories of thinking, beyond comprehension, immortal. Because it cannot be identified in any way with the body, the *ātman* is not subject to the experiences of the body, such as death and birth. Yet the *Upaniṣads* affirm that the soul exists within our physical natures.

The result of this deep awareness is peacefulness and serenity that comes about from knowing there is nothing to fear.

Although the *Upaniṣads* sought to determine the human essence by turning inward, at the same time, they sought a deeper understanding of the ultimate reality, that which explains the totality of everything there is. A concept reworked from the Vedas, *Brahman* literally means “that which makes great.” During the evolution of classical Hinduism, *Brahman* came to refer to the power of all powers, the deepest reality of the cosmos. The concept of *Brahman* became increasingly abstract and difficult to grasp; although *Brahman* is removed from the world of everyday experience, the *Upaniṣads* assure us that it is closer to us than we are to ourselves. *Brahman* transcends all human categories and images. It is *nirguna*, without qualities. Because its only quality is that of not having qualities, *Brahman* is often discussed by referring to what it is not, an approach known as negative theology, or *via negativa*.

As the sages of the *Upaniṣads* increasingly appreciated the incomprehensible and unutterable nature of both *ātman* and *Brahman*, these two ideas converged. The conclusion of the sages was that which is called soul is identical with ultimate reality itself. The identity of *ātman* and *Brahman* means they are consubstantial, two names designating the same reality. The true self is God, is ultimate reality. This consubstantiality offers a highly exalted view of humanity. Like many traditions that affirm the existence of a soul, the classical Hindu view understands that the embodied soul is not at rest, is not at its true home. It continues in this restless state, seeking ever-new manifestations, until it finds, as Augustine would say, its rest in God. According to the *Upaniṣads*, *samsāra* is a consequence of our own ignorance, our lack of understanding. Implicit in the *Upaniṣads* is the notion

of *māyā*, the veil over reality that causes us to perceive plurality where there is actually unity.

The principle of the unity of *Brahman* and *ātman* is foundational “theory” for this path of wisdom, and this idea gives shape to the characteristic elements of the path. Taking the path of wisdom means living in such a way that one’s very life expresses the truth of this principle, as if there is no individual self separate from the rest of reality. Accepting the path of wisdom requires renunciation, giving up all attachment to anything that encourages a sense of separateness or individuality. Whereas conventional religion may encourage us to look for truth in a book or somewhere else, the *Upaniśads* tell us that the truth is not “out there,” but within the deepest self.

The result of this deep awareness is peacefulness and serenity that comes about from knowing there is nothing to fear. There is no rebirth, because there is no clinging to life. ■

Essential Reading

Olivelle, *The Upaniśads*.

Supplemental Reading

Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*, chapter 3.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the theological advantages and disadvantages of conceiving ultimate reality as devoid of qualities?
2. From where do thoughts come?

Seeing God

Lecture 9

Early Western interpreters generally regarded Hinduism as a crude and hopelessly idolatrous religion. This view still lingers in the Western imagination, due in no small measure, to basic misunderstandings about the nature of Hindu polytheism and iconography.

The ultimate object of religion is mystery, beyond the human capacity to conceptualize adequately. Hinduism takes two general approaches in the face of mystery. One approach is to say, think, and imagine nothing at all; the ultimate is ineffable. Say anything about it, and it has been distorted. This approach is implied in the way of wisdom. Another approach, more characteristic of the mainstreams of world religions, is based on the belief that we are not at liberty to discard language and images of the divine. But images must be used carefully lest we make the grave mistake of believing that our concepts are actually adequate to describe ultimate mystery. The characteristic features of Hindu-theism—the many gods and goddesses and the veneration of their images—operate in a way to mediate divine reality without slipping into idolatry.

Hinduism embraces polytheism and monotheism, conceiving reality to be both one and many. The many *devas* are just so many different expressions of the one reality, *Brahman*, as it is known or revealed to humans. *Brahman* is ultimate reality as it is unknown and unknowable. The many gods of Hinduism are ways to enrich the understanding of the divine while militating against confusing image and reality. The very number of gods and their complex manifestations, in many ways so outrageous in their extravagance, serve to astound and overwhelm the human mind, reminding us of the unspeakable nature of ultimate reality. Even though the Hindu pantheon is immense, individual Hindus do not, of course, even attempt to give worship to all the gods equally. Those who wish to worship have an *ista-devatā*, a personal deity of choice, often the god worshipped by one's family or village, but the decision to worship a specific god is uniquely one's own. Devotees worship their particular deity as the supreme god, but do not feel compelled to deny the reality of other gods or their supremacy for their own followers.



Local priest with village deities in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. When the likeness of a Hindu deity is completed, its god or goddess may be invited through rituals to inhabit it.

Hindu iconography, the practice of physically representing the divine, has often seemed scandalous to many in the Western world. The easy identification of divine images and idolatry, however, actually betrays a superficial understanding of the nature and function of religious iconography. Images of the *devas* and *devīs* can be anthropomorphic or non-anthropomorphic. The vast array of non-anthropomorphic symbols includes natural phenomena, such as stones, earthen mounds, trees, rivers, and celestial bodies; the *lingam*; and *yantras*, or geometric designs signifying the *devī*. To imagine ultimate reality as anthropomorphic in some measure—with intelligence, will, emotions, and perhaps even a body—helps us grasp the mystery and relate to it in ways not possible with non-anthropomorphic representations.

The danger, though, in personalizing the divine world is bringing it too close to the human, making it too much like ourselves so that it seems finite. Hindu images of the gods endeavor to avert this danger by incorporating elements that frankly remind devotees that the gods are also not like humans and cannot be reduced to finite status.

To illustrate these points, we will explore, in greater detail, the iconography of one of Hinduism's great gods, Śiva. Possibly identifiable on artifacts as early as the Indus Valley civilization, Śiva also has connections with the Vedic tradition as the god Rudra (the Howler), whom many scholars believe to be one of Śiva's early forms. Today, Śiva is at the center of Śaivism, one

of the three most prominent religions in the Hindu family of religions. Its followers are known as Śaivites.

Śiva is both the creator and destroyer of the universe, movement and tranquility, light and darkness, male and female, celibate and promiscuous. These paradoxes serve to symbolize the limitlessness and freedom of the divine and suggest that what we might ordinarily consider oppositions are, in fact, closer than we think. These divine dimensions are illustrated in the images of Śiva as Mahāyogi, the Lord of the Dance (Natarāja), and Half-Woman Lord. The image of Śiva as the Great Yogi accents Śiva's tranquil, ascetic aspect, providing a model for many Śaivites who seek to practice asceticism. The Natarāja image depicts Śiva's cosmic dance during the auspicious occasion of the Mahashivaratri, the great night of Śiva, when he dances to dispel the ignorance of the night. He holds a drum and a flame; with the drum, he sounds the world into existence, and with the flame, he destroys it in order to create another. Another image of Śiva illustrates his androgynous nature. All Hindu gods have their essential female counterpart, their Śakti, and in this image, Śiva is depicted as the "Half-Woman Lord," a single individual with male and female halves. Such an image suggests the all-compassing nature of the divine and reminds the viewer of the limitations of anything in human experience to capture it.

The Hindu images of divine, both anthropomorphic and aniconic, function symbolically to point beyond themselves to ultimate, infinite reality. Yet there is a special sense in which the images are understood to manifest or embody the divine reality. When an image is completed by a craftsperson, the god or goddess it represents may be invited to inhabit it through rituals of consecration, ordinarily for a specific period of time, such as that *deva's* festival. When the designated term is up, the physical image is destroyed, often by burning or immersion in water, reminding devotees that although the god may indeed incarnate the image, the image is not the god. The incarnation of god in Hindu images has important implications for ritual

Devotees worship their particular deity as the supreme god, but do not feel compelled to deny the reality of other gods or their supremacy for their own followers.

and worship practices (*pūjā*). In a temple, during the period of incarnation, the image is treated as if it were god in living form. At specific times during the day, the temple image is made available to worshippers for *darśan*, or seeing and being seen by the god. ■

Essential Reading

Dimmitt and van Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Purāṇas*, chapter 4.

Supplemental Reading

Eck, *Darśan*, chapters 1–2.

Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, chapter 3.

Questions to Consider

1. What accounts for the way some humans seem so fervently devoted to religious images and icons, while others are so fervently opposed to such images?
2. Why might worshipers of Śiva find him such a compelling image for the divine reality?

The Way of Devotion

Lecture 10

Hinduism affirms not only the multiplicity of the divine, but also the multiplicity of paths to divine reality. Different people require different spiritualities.

Many Hindus find the way of devotion, or *bhakti*, more compelling than that of wisdom. The approach of the devotional way is to focus one's passionate nature on the love of a personal deity and make that paramount above all things. New texts added to the canon of Hindu writings in the post-classical period were very important in shaping Hindu piety in the *bhakti* movement. These works include the *Mahābhārata* and *Ramāyāna*, the two great epics of India, and a collection known as the *Purāṇas*. This last, composed between 300–1600 C.E., provides the sources for much of the mythology of the Hindu gods and goddesses. We will examine the *bhakti-mārga* by means of the *Bhagavad-gītā* (actually part of the *Mahābhārata*). Neither the most sacred nor the most authoritative, the *Gītā* is widely read and extremely well known.

Vishnu, in his manifestation as Krishna, is one of the central characters of the *Bhagavad-gītā*. According to Hindu mythology, Vishnu is a member of the cosmic triad, the three gods who have responsibility for creating, maintaining, and destroying the universe. Vishnu sustains the cosmos between the times of creation and destruction. The religion of Vishnu, known as Vaiṣṇava, is the most popular Hindu



Vishnu in his avatara form of Varaha, the boar.

religion. In iconography, Vishnu is identified by the symbolic attributes he carries in each of his four hands: a club symbolizing knowledge; a ball signifying the earth; a *cakra*, or disc, symbolizing power; and a conch shell to suggest water and the origins of existence.

Vishnu's most salient feature is his *avatāras*, or incarnations. Literally meaning "to descend into," these refer to the times when the god descends to earth and assumes an earthly manifestation at critical junctures in the world's history. From the standpoint of religious practice, Vishnu's most important *avatāras* have been Krishna and Rāma. As Rāma, Vishnu appeared on earth as a royal figure who defeats his wife's abductor in the *Ramāyāna*. As Krishna, he was remembered as a playful and adventurous boy and young man and for his role in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Krishna is probably a familiar name to Westerners because of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), known as "Hare Krishnas."

The religion of Vishnu, known as Vaiṣṇava, is the most popular Hindu religion.

The *Bhagavad-gītā*, which is usually translated as the "Song of the Lord," was probably composed between 400 B.C.E. and 100 C.E., and its author or authors are unknown. Though usually read as an independent story, the *Bhagavad-gītā* is part of the *Mahābhārata*, probably the world's longest epic poem with more than 100,000 verses. The *Gītā* is essentially a dialogue between Vishnu in his *avatāra* as Krishna and a warrior by the name of Arjuna, which takes place on the battlefield just as two grand armies, the Kurus and the Pandavas, are about to go to war. The Kurus and the Pandavas are members of the same clan, and it is precisely because the enemy numbers include his uncles, cousins, and teachers that Arjuna is so aggrieved. Suddenly, all action is suspended, as if time has stopped. Arjuna sees his family members across enemy lines and drops his bow, having lost his will to fight. Surprisingly, Krishna's first reaction is to shame Arjuna, but these appeals do not work. Arjuna's conflict is deep and genuine, and he is paralyzed until he can see

his way clearly. His inner turmoil is a familiar one—the dissonance one feels when competing values clash.

This dissonance becomes a teaching moment, and Arjuna wisely asks Krishna to be his guru. Arjuna receives several lessons from the teachings of the *Upaniṣads*, including the ultimate meaninglessness of birth and death and action without attachment or aversion to keep from creating karma. Through the teachings of Krishna to Arjuna, any reader of the *Gītā* can obtain an almost comprehensive portrait of Hindu practices and worldviews. Neither simple nor always clear, the richness of the *Gītā* permits nearly every Hindu to find meaning in it particular to his or her own place in life. As the dialogue proceeds, Krishna's lessons begin gradually to focus more and more on himself, becoming increasingly characteristic of the path of *bhakti*. Krishna encourages Arjuna to focus his mind, will, and heart on god and let all else go. For *bhakti* practice, what is done is not as important as how it is done. All that matters is to do all things with faith and devotion to the god. In a climactic moment, Arjuna asks Krishna to grant him an extremely rare boon, the ability to see Krishna in his full glory as god. Krishna gives Arjuna a divine eye with which to gaze on the god's form. After his vision, Arjuna arises and goes to battle, claiming that his doubts have been dispelled, though precisely what resolved his misgivings is not altogether clear. Much in the *Gītā* seems left unsettled, despite the fact that Arjuna himself seems to have gained clarity.

Significantly, the *Gītā* itself ends before we know the battle's outcome, but neither the victor nor the problem of war is really the issue in the *Gītā*. The context of war is significant in the *Gītā*, however, because the battlefield is really a metaphor for the soul, the self, the mind, and its struggle—ordinary Hindus, wrestling with issues of dharma, one's sacred duty. As a metaphor for the self and its internal struggles, perhaps the *Gītā* is a reminder that often, there are no clear avenues of choice. Our decisions must be made in ambiguity and uncertainty. ■

Essential Reading

Dimmitt and van Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Purāṇas*, chapters 2–3.

Miller, *The Bhagavad Gītā*.

Supplemental Reading

Brook, *The Mahābhārata*.

Buck, *Mahābhārata*.

Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*, chapters 6–7.

Questions to Consider

1. Why might the *bhakti-mārga*, or path of passionate devotion to a god, be more widely followed, and accompanied by more popular literature, than the path of wisdom?
2. At the end of the *Gītā*, Arjuna claims that his doubts about going to war have been dispelled by Krishna's teachings and his manifestation as god. As a reader, do you find Krishna as persuasive as Arjuna did?

The Goddess and Her Devotees

Lecture 11

The worship of female deities has a long history in India, and today remains one of Hinduism's prominent religious features.

From the Indus Valley civilization to the Vedic pantheon, the worship of female deities has a long history in India, and today remains one of Hinduism's prominent religious features. Śaktism, the worship of the Goddess, is regarded as a major Hindu religion alongside Śaivism and Vaiṣṇava. Though there are countless goddesses treated as distinct deities, it is common, when speaking of the divine female in India, to refer to the Goddess in the singular, because all particular goddesses are forms of Devī or Mahadevī, the Great Goddess. The many manifestations of the Devī can be classified into two broad categories. The first is the category of consorts—goddesses who are the wives and companions of the great gods. The second group is composed of the independent goddesses, who are not associated with male divine figures by way of marriage. A goddess's relationship to a male god determines her basic character. Divine consorts are seen as benevolent, gentle, and life-giving; independent, unmarried goddesses are viewed as malevolent, terrifying, and lustful.

Each of the great gods of Hinduism is married to a manifestation of the Devī. Brahmā, the creator, is married to Sarasvatī; Śiva is married to Pārvatī; Vishnu, to Laxmi. Vishnu's *avatāras* also have consorts: Rāma is married to Sītā, and Krishna's consort is Rādhā. Male gods rarely appear without their female counterparts, but goddesses, even the married ones, may appear without their husbands in temple icons. Laxmi is not only Vishnu's wife, but she is also the goddess of good fortune and wealth. The Devī Sarasvatī, almost always worshiped alone and never with her consort Brahmā, is the goddess of education and music. Pārvatī is usually not worshiped alone, but together with Śiva. Sītā, the wife of Rāma, is considered the ideal wife because of her fidelity and obedience to her husband. Rādhā, Krishna's consort, is the image of the devotee with a passionate love for god. The relationship between the goddesses and human women in Hinduism is very

complex, but, at least in instances of Sītā and Rādhā, the female deity is regarded as a model worthy of emulation.

The independent goddesses are quite clearly not considered divine exemplars of femininity, though it would be a mistake to assume that the goddesses and gods are images of ideal human life simply by virtue of their divinity. Many of the myths about the Devī depict her engaged in activity akin to that of the great male gods, such as protecting the cosmos against powerful demons or accomplishing difficult tasks that the male gods cannot. Durgā was born from the combined anger of the two great gods Vishnu and Śiva, in order to defeat a powerful buffalo-demon, which she did, after a long and vicious battle—now celebrated

Male gods rarely appear without their female counterparts, but goddesses, even the married ones, may appear without their husbands in temple icons.

by a nine-day festival in Bengal. The most terrifying form of the Devī, however, is Kālī, who, like the ascetic Śiva, haunts the cremation grounds. Theologically, Kālī reveals that life is inherently painful and that life feeds on death. Human sacrifices were offered to Kālī in the not-too-distant past.

Independent goddesses are also associated with epidemics, such as smallpox, which are viewed as the result of the goddess's anger at being neglected by her village or patrons. The contrast between the independent goddesses and their married female counterparts is striking. One explanation for the rage to which the Goddess is subject derives from her childlessness. Without child-bearing, she is seen as not having fulfilled the central role of the female. Yet Hindus see children as a sign of loss of immortality in a goddess. The sufferings one endures in this life are regarded as the chastisements of an ultimately loving mother, to whom one clings in all circumstances. Being childless, married goddesses are also subject to rage, but their relationship to male gods channels their anger into nurture. The *Laws of Manu* state that a woman is never fit for independence.

The female aspect of divinity is considered its creative and activating power, called *Śakti*. *Śakti*, the active principle in Hinduism, is feminine; the

masculine principle, or *śiva*, is—by contrast—so passive as to be dead. The indispensable nature of the *Śakti* is suggested in a macabre image depicting Kālī dancing on Śiva’s dead body. The goddess’s red forehead marking also contrasts with the white forehead marking for the gods. Red is the color of power, energy, and heat; white is a cooling color, often associated with death and ashes. Yet goddesses require passive gods to give form to their dynamic power, because without form and restraint, the energy embodied in the goddess can become dangerous. One other striking difference between the gods and goddesses is their realm of activity. In general, the gods are seen as celestial; and goddesses, as terrestrial. This connection is shown in many ways. The earth itself is a goddess named Bhudevī; rivers are also goddesses, such as Gangā, and the entire land of India is a goddess. One final manifestation of the Goddess that is worthy of mention is the embodiment of the Devī as an actual woman. For some, an especially powerful woman, such as Indira Gandhi—one of India’s prime ministers—might be regarded as the Goddess in the flesh.



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Vishnu and his wife Laxmi. Laxmi is also the goddess of good fortune and wealth.

Closely connected with the worship of the Goddess is a large collection of writings called the *Tantras*, composed in the medieval period, which are essentially technical manuals for how one might attain liberation and enlightenment through dedication to the Devī. The yogic practice of Tantrism, or simply Tantra, is based on the techniques described in these writings. It is very clear that the purpose of Hindu Tantra is not physical pleasure, but spiritual bliss and enlightenment. When Westerners think of Tantra, they usually think of what is called “left-handed” Tantra. So-called “right-handed” Tantra is a worship practice that is not altogether unlike the worship of Vishnu or Śiva. Both varieties of Tantra are open to men and women of all castes and operate independently of Brahminic authority.

What many find scandalous and others intriguing about “left-handed” Tantra is its ritual use of certain activities ordinarily forbidden to Hindus—such as eating meat, drinking wine, and engaging in sexual intercourse between partners who are not married to each other. Tantra is not the casual practice of these activities, but their deliberate usage for the purpose of enlightenment. These practices are done as a form of worship to the Devī and to harness the energy of the human body and human desires. Tantric yoga is believed to release energy from a vast power source called the *kundalinī* that is coiled at the base of the spine, allowing it to flow through *charkas*, “circles” or power centers, throughout the body. ■

Essential Reading

Dimmitt and van Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Purāṇas*, chapter 5.

Supplemental Reading

Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, chapter 2.

Ray, *Devī (The Goddess)*.

Yeshe, *Introduction to Tantra: The Transformation of Desire*.

Questions to Consider

1. What effects does conceiving the divine as female have on the way a society views human women?
2. Why do you think male gods tend to be associated with the sky and female goddesses, with the earth?

Hinduism in the Modern Period

Lecture 12

Modern Hinduism has had to face challenges brought by the advent of Islam and Western culture. Both incursions into India have left profound and lasting imprints on Hinduism.

In many ways, 21st century Hindus continue to struggle with issues associated with Islam and Westernization. In this lecture, we first discuss Islam's effects on Hinduism. We will see how the great theological differences between Hinduism and Islam have formed the basis for tense relationships between Hindus and Muslims, frequently erupting into outright violence. Then, we consider the effects of British expansion into India and the various religious responses to the British presence, giving special attention to the religious philosophy of Mohandas Gandhi. Finally, we examine the articulation of Hinduism to the West through such figures as Vivekananda and consider the movement of Hinduism beyond the borders of India.

Though in the West, we generally associate Islam with the *Arab* world, the majority of Muslims live in South Asia and eastward. Islam first came to India late in the eighth century C.E., through military conquests, but its influence in India was not consolidated until several centuries later when Muslim sultans established a capital at Delhi (now “Old Delhi”). By the 15th century, Muslim sultans ruled most of India; their power was concentrated in the northern regions, where most Indian Muslims live today, though they are present throughout the country.

Two religions could hardly contrast more starkly than Hinduism and Islam. Hinduism embraces both polytheism and monotheism; Islam, however, is fervently and singularly monotheistic. Hindus venerate images of the divine; Muslims are iconoclastic, perceiving such images as *shirk*, or idolatry, the greatest sin, according to Islam. The Hindus have an ages-long practice of honoring the life-giving and life-sustaining qualities of the cow, whereas Muslims have no reservations about eating beef. Although Buddhism, in decline, did not survive the coming of Islam, Hinduism did—because it was so deeply rooted in the everyday routine of India. At first, the Muslim rulers

ignored the challenges of Hinduism and did not try to convert Hindus to Islam—because Hindus were susceptible to a greater tax rate. Later, Sufi orders began to proselytize the Hindus in great numbers and made many converts.

There have been some bright moments in the Hindu-Muslim relationship, such as the 16th-century rise of Mughal emperor Akbar (the Great), highly esteemed by Hindus as a tolerant ruler, which created a fine syncretistic culture. In 1947, stresses came to a head when India was partitioned into India and Pakistan at the moment of its independence from Great Britain. The president of the Muslim League, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, argued that because Islam does not distinguish between religious and political law, Muslims needed a separate state to be true to Islam, and his view carried the day. The partition, however, did not end hostilities. India and Pakistan continue a longstanding dispute over the region of Jammu and Kashmir.



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The Taj Mahal in northern India. It is considered one of the finest examples of architecture built during the reign of the Mughal emperors, a Muslim dynasty in power over most of northern India from the early 16th to the mid-18th century.

The British defeated the Muslims in the 18th century, initiating the period of British colonialism in India. As the British established their Indian empire, they tended to favor the Hindus over the Muslims and granted them greater administrative power. Although the British directly ruled India for only 90 years, the British presence in India was far more significant than that of the Muslims in many ways. The British Raj introduced Western values and social dynamics into India, which were disruptive to traditional Hindu culture. Industrialization and urbanization had uprooting effects on traditions of Indian society. Old restrictions imposed by caste and family could be more easily disregarded in urban areas; traditional practices and beliefs were placed in doubt and reevaluated. In view of the

Among all the major religions, Hinduism has the longest history, the greatest diversity, and the most gods and goddesses of any.

Western focus on the material world, many Hindus began to reassess *this* world's significance, spawning a greater interest in the material realm. The British encouraged English literacy. This exposed many Hindus to the values of the Western world, including the principle of the equality of all persons, which stands at odds with assumptions of the caste system.

Religiously, the reactions of Hindus to Westernization were mixed. The Brahmo Samāj, or the Society of Believers in Brahman, was founded in 1828 by an important modern Hindu reformer named Ram Mohan Roy. Constituting a liberal revision of Hinduism in response to Western influence, it might be described as traditional Hinduism transformed by an encounter with Christianity. The Ārya Samāj, in contrast, was a “fundamentalist” response to the influx of Western values, founded by Swami Dayananda Sarasvati in the late 19th century. The effects of the British in India had political as well as religious ramifications. The Western idea of nation-state sovereignty stimulated a nationalist spirit that would eventually lead to the movement to establish India as an independent nation.

Known in India and throughout the world as “Mahatma,” the Great Soul, Mohandas K. Gandhi was a key figure in the independence movement, and his life may well illustrate the best of modern Hinduism. Educated in England

as a barrister, Gandhi's politics were based less on jurisprudence and more on religion. Not a theologian or systematic religious thinker, Gandhi's political vision and practice were rooted in his understanding of sacred scriptures from many of the world's religions; such openness to spiritual truth, regardless of where it is found, is a characteristic quality of much of Hinduism. Gandhi had an appreciation of all the major religious traditions and did not want religion to become divisive, one of the reasons he opposed the partition of India and Pakistan. Gandhi called his philosophy *Satyāgraha*, a term that meant grasping for—and holding onto—truth, or God, because for Gandhi, “God is Truth.” In his childhood, Gandhi had learned from Jains the practice of *ahimsā*, the non-harming of living beings. Gandhi practiced nonviolent resistance in an endeavor to reveal the truth of oppression to the oppressor, believing that the oppressor's own sense of fairness and truthfulness would force him to relent and stop the injustice. In a sense, Gandhi opened a new avenue for the karma yoga, by making the political sphere an acceptable arena for the practice of religion. In 1948, Gandhi was assassinated by a fellow Hindu who believed that he had conceded too much to the Muslims.

Only in the last century has there been a significant movement of Hindus and Hinduism into the West. Before the late 19th century, the main vehicle for the transport of Hinduism to the West was literary. Some of the most important Hindu scriptures had been translated into European languages in the 18th century and were available to Western intellectuals. The first important representative of Hinduism to come to the West was Swami Vivekananda, sometimes known as the first Hindu missionary to the West, who appeared in Chicago in 1893 at the first Parliament of Religions. Since Vivekananda, many Hindu teachers have sought to spread their teachings to eager Western disciples.

Among all the major religions, Hinduism has the longest history, the greatest diversity, and the most gods and goddesses of any. Trying to squeeze all that could—or needs to be said—into any condensed format is a nearly impossible feat, but perhaps this series will whet the appetite for further exploration of the Hindu traditions. ■

Essential Reading

Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.

Supplemental Reading

Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*, chapter 8.

Ray, *Devī (The Goddess)*.

Questions to Consider

1. What aspects of modern Western culture account for the strong divergent reactions that many outside the West have for it?
2. Do you think it will be possible for Hinduism to be relevant to the lives of modern Indians without losing sight of its rich history and tradition?

Timeline

c. 3000–1500 B.C.E.	Indus Valley civilization
c. 2300–1200 B.C.E.	Composition of the <i>Rig-veda</i>
c. 1600–1000 B.C.E.	Migration of Āryans
c. 1200–900 B.C.E.	Composition of the <i>Yajur-veda</i> , <i>Sama-veda</i> , and <i>Atharva-veda</i>
c. 800–200 B.C.E.	Composition of the <i>Upaniśads</i>
563–483 B.C.E.	Gautama, the Buddha
540–468 B.C.E.	Vardhamana Mahavira, founder of Jainism
c. 400 B.C.E.–400 C.E.	Composition of the <i>Mahābhārata</i>
327–325 B.C.E.	Campaign of Alexander the Great in India
c. 200 B.C.E.–100 C.E.	Composition of the <i>Bhagavad-gītā</i>
c. 200 B.C.E.–200 C.E.	Composition of the <i>Laws of Manu</i> ; composition of the <i>Rāmāyana</i>
c. 200 B.C.E.–300 C.E.	Composition of the <i>Dharma-śāstras</i>
c. 300–1700 C.E.	Composition of the <i>Purāṇas</i>
c. 500–700 C.E.	Composition of Early <i>Tantras</i>
711–715 C.E.	First Muslim invasions of northwest India

1192.....	Muslim capital established at Delhi
c. 1200 C.E.	Jayadeva's <i>Gītāgovinda</i>
c. 1350–1400.....	Lalla (Lalleshwari), Kashmiri poet- <i>bhahta</i> saint
1469–1539 C.E.....	Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism
1486–1533.....	Caitanya Mahaprabhu, Vaiṣṇava saint
1498.....	Vasco da Gama lands on India's west coast
1526–1707.....	Mughal rule in India
1542–1605.....	Akbar the Great
1757.....	Defeat of Bengali Muslim rulers by British
1757–1947.....	British rule in India
1774–1833.....	Ram Mohan Roy, Brahmo Samāj founder
1824–1883.....	Dayananda Sarasvati, Ārya Samāj founder
1828.....	Founding of the Brahmo Samāj
1836–1886.....	Ramakrishna
1861–1941.....	Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel laureate
1863–1902.....	Vivekananda

1869–1948.....	Mohandas K. Gandhi
1875.....	Founding of the Ārya Samāj
1876–1948.....	Muhammad Ali Jinnah, President of the Muslim League
1893.....	World Parliament of Religion, Chicago
1896–1977.....	A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, ISKCON founder
1947.....	Indian independence and partition

Glossary

adharmā: the absence of dharma; chaos.

ahimsā: the practice of absolute non-harming of living beings.

arati: waving lights, such as a camphor flame, before the image of a god or goddess.

artha: material wealth. According to classical Hinduism, *artha* is one of the four main goals, or goods, of life.

Ārya Samāj: a Hindu sect begun in the 19th century by Swami Dayananda Sarasvati, who disliked popular Hindu practices, such as *pūjā* and pilgrimage. The Ārya Samāj held the Veda as the source of all truth—scientific, historical, and spiritual—and denied the authority of the *Gītā* and the *Purāṇas*.

Āryans: the central Asian pastoral nomads who migrated into India in the middle part of the second millennium B.C.E., bringing with them the Veda in oral tradition.

āśramas: the stages of life for upper-caste Hindus.

atharvan: a shamanic priest of the Vedic era whose work included healing and conducting rites of passage for Āryans. The term is also used to indicate the rituals performed by this priest.

ātman: the soul. Initially understood as the breath in the early Vedic era, the *ātman* is later regarded by Hindus as immortal and transmigratory.

AUM (or OM): the primordial mantra, or *pranava*. AUM is the syllable that encompasses all syllables; the word out of which the whole world is created; the oral embodiment of Brahman.

avatāras: the earthly manifestations of god. *Avatāras* are usually associated with Vishnu, who “descends” at critical times in the world’s history.

avidyā: ignorance.

Axial Age: term coined by philosopher Karl Jaspers to denote an era of exceptional religious and philosophical creativity between 800–200 B.C.E. that gave rise to the major world religions.

Bhagavad-gītā: much-beloved Hindu text recounting the dialogue of Lord Krishna and Arjuna before the war between the Kurus and the Pāndavas.

bhakti: devotion to God.

bhakti-mārga: the path by which one receives liberation from *samsāra* by devotion to a personal God.

Bharāta: indigenous term for the land of India.

brahmacarin: the first *āśrama* for an upper-caste male, in which he practices celibacy and studies with a guru. The term is also used for those of any age who practice celibacy for spiritual purposes.

Brahman: the absolute, ultimate reality. Originally, Brahman was the Āryan word for the power inherent in ritual; later, the term comes to designate the highest reality beyond all conceptualization.

Brahmin: the caste of priests and intellectuals.

Brahmo Samāj: a Hindu movement founded in the 19th century by Ram Mohan Roy. The Brahmo Samāj, or Society of Believers in Brahman, denounced polytheism and the *pūjā*, criticized the treatment of women, and held the Veda to be authoritative only when consistent with reason.

Buddhism: religious tradition whose origins date to the ferment that initiated Jainism and classical Hinduism. Following the conversion of Emperor Aśoka, Buddhism becomes the dominant religion of India and remains so until the advent of Islam returns Hinduism to the ascendancy.

***cakras*:** literally, “wheel.” In Tantra and other yogic practices, the human body is conceived to have a number of *cakras*, or power centers, along the spine, from its base to the crown of the head. Physical and spiritual wholeness depends on allowing the free flow of energy through these power circles.

caste: Portuguese term to describe the stratification of Hindu society based on occupation and purity. Caste usually refers to the *varna* system, the fourfold classification of Brāhmins, Kśatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras.

cosmic maintenance: the pre-axial function of religion in which the processes of the world are supported or controlled by human activity.

Dalits: self-designation for the outcastes of India. *Dalit* means “oppressed one.”

***darśana*:** to “take *darśana*” means to see and to be seen by the deity. *Darśana* is also the word for a philosophical system, such as Yoga or Vedānta.

***deva*:** Sanskrit term for god.

***devī*:** Sanskrit term for goddess.

***dharma*:** sacred duty according to caste; the principle of cosmic order; “religion.” Dharma is the principle that succeeded the Vedic concept of *Rita*.

***Dharma-śāstras*:** the genre of literature that prescribes the duties of castes.

Forest dweller: the third stage of life for an upper-caste male Hindu. The forest-dweller stage indicates increasing withdrawal from society and preparation for the fourth stage, complete renunciation (*sannyāsa*).

gṛīha rites: Vedic rituals performed in the home, usually involving the offering of food to the gods.

guru: teacher.

Harappā: one of the two largest cities of the Indus Valley civilization. The size and centrality of Harappā suggests that it functioned as the capital of this culture, which is sometimes called the Harappān civilization.

Harijans: “children of God.” Term coined by Mohandas Gandhi to refer to the untouchables of India. Today, the untouchables prefer the name Dalits.

henotheism: German Indologist Max Müller’s term for a form of theism in which the believer worships one god as supreme without denying the validity of other gods.

Holi: immensely popular spring festival celebrated in North India to mark the return of the new year. Holi is also known as the Festival of Colors.

householder (grihastha): the second stage of life for both men and women of caste. At the householder stage, Hindus marry, raise children, work, and contribute to the good of family and society.

Indus Valley civilization: also known as the Harappān civilization. One of the great cultures of the ancient world, the Indus Valley civilization flourished from 3000–1600 B.C.E. in northern India along the Indus River system.

ISKCON: the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, founded in 1966 as a Vaiṣṇava sect by A. C. BhaktiVedānta Swami Prabhupada. Also known as the “Hare Krishnas.”

Islam: monotheistic religion whose Prophet Muhammad received the revelation of Allah in the seventh century C.E. Islam comes to northern India in the 12th century. Muslims today make up almost 10 percent of the Indian population.

ista-devatā: one's personal deity of choice.

Jainism: religious tradition whose origins date to the ferment that initiated Buddhism and classical Hinduism. Jainism and Buddhism are regarded by Hindus as heterodox philosophies because they deny Vedic authority. The Jain practice of *ahimsā* has a deep influence on Hindu ethics.

janneu: the sacred thread given to boys of the upper three castes when they are initiated into the twice-born.

jāti: one's birth group. *Jāti* determines social standing, occupation, marital possibilities, diet, and other practices. Often translated as "subcaste," the more than 2,000 *jātis* fit somewhat imperfectly within the *varna* system.

jñāna-mārga: the path of liberation from *samsāra* based on the quest for wisdom and the dissolution of illusion. The *jñāna-mārga* usually requires ascetic practice and great discipline.

kāma: pleasure, especially sexual pleasure and desire. *Kāma* is one of the four goods of life according to Hinduism.

karma: action and its consequences. In the Hindu view, karma is a principle of justice, ensuring that the effects of one's actions return to the agent. Karma is what binds the soul to the cycle of endless existence and determines its station in future existences.

karma-mārga: the path of action in which one seeks to improve rebirth by maximizing meritorious deeds and minimizing evil ones.

Kṣatriyas: the caste of warriors and administrators.

kundalinī: divine power in an individual, represented as a coiled serpent at the base of the spine. Tantric practices aim to unleash this power to effect enlightenment.

Laws of Manu: one of the earliest and most important codifications of dharma, attributed to Manu, the ancestor of all human beings.

lingam: representation of the phallus. Thousands of stone *lingams* were discovered in the excavations of the Indus Valley civilization and are presumed to be associated with rites of fertility. Today, the *lingam* and *yoni* (its vulvic counterpart) symbolize the god Śiva and his Śakti.

Mahābhārata: One of the two grand epics of Hinduism. The *Mahābhārata*, probably the world's longest poem, comprises eighteen books and details the conflict between the Kurus and the Pāṇdavas.

Mahatma: a “Great Soul”; a title of great respect given to especially accomplished Hindus.

Mahāyogi: epithet for Śiva in his aspect as the great practitioner of meditation and austerities.

mantra: a sound or phrase embodying sacred power.

mārga: path or discipline.

māyā: illusion. The veil over reality that prevents the unenlightened from seeing the world as it truly is. From the perspective of Advaita Vedānta, *māyā* causes us to see multiplicity where there is, in reality, only unity.

mlecca: a non-Hindu; a foreigner.

Mohenjo-daro: one of the two major cities of the Indus Valley civilization. Mohenjo-daro, or “mound of death,” takes its name from a later city built atop the Indus Valley site. What Indus Valley dwellers called this city is not known.

mokṣa: release or liberation from the wheel of *samsāra*. Pursued and conceptualized in a variety of ways, *mokṣa* is the ultimate goal of Hindus.

Mughuls: Muslim emperors who ruled northern India, beginning with the reign of Akbar (1556–1605). The Mughals remained in power in the north until the establishment of British rule in the 18th century.

mūrti: the form of the god. *Mūrti* refers to the physical image or representation of the divine.

Nātarāja: the image of Shiva as Lord of the Dance, embodying the paradoxical nature of the divine.

nirguna: without qualities. This term is used to describe the aspect of Brahman that is ineffable.

non-duality: the philosophical position that denies the dualism of human and divine, subject and object. The position of non-duality is suggested by the *Upaniṣads* and given systematic expression in the Advaita Vedānta philosophy of Śaṅkara.

OM: see AUM.

once-born: those who do not undergo the ritual initiation reserved for members of the three upper castes, that is, the Śūdras and Dalits.

prasāda: sacred food offered to the gods.

pūjā: the ritual worship of a god, goddess, or object representing sacred reality.

Purānas: Composed between 300–1700 C.E., the *Purānas* are a main source of mythology about the great gods of Hinduism, especially Śiva, Vishnu, and Śakti.

Rāmāyana: One of the two great epics of India. The *Rāmāyana* relates the adventures of Rāma and his wife Sītā.

Rig-veda: the oldest and most important of the Vedas, compiled between 2300 and 1200 B.C.E. The *Rig-veda* comprises more than 1,000 hymns to various Vedic deities; *Rig* means “praise.”

rishis: seers; one of many Hindu words to denote a holy person. Often used especially to refer to the ancient sages to whom the Veda was revealed.

Rita: Vedic principle of order that regulated the cosmos, society, and ritual and furnished the basis of correspondences among them.

ritual purity and pollution: ways of defining what is and is not appropriate for a society’s sense of order and structure. Purity and pollution often pertain to matters of the body, particularly those acts or events that entail crossing bodily thresholds.

sādhu: a Hindu holy man or saint.

śakti: divine female power.

Samhitās: the four “collections” of the Veda, including the *Rig-veda*, the *Sama-veda*, the *Atharva-veda*, and the *Yajur-veda*.

samsāra: the phenomenal world of change and transience. *Samsāra* denotes the situation in which the soul sequentially incarnates in different bodies at different levels of existence.

samskāra: a sacrament; a term for rites of passages, such as naming, initiation, or cremation.

sanātana dharma: the “eternal truth.” “*Sanātana dharma*” may be the closest Hindu equivalent to the concept of “Hinduism.”

sannyāsins: those who renounce family, home, possessions, and all markers of previous identity to seek final liberation. Although infrequently pursued, renunciation is the final *āśrama*, or stage, for upper-caste Hindus.

sati: ritual act in which a widow burns with her husband's corpse on his funeral pyre. Abolished by the British in the 19th century, the act is extremely rare today. The ritual takes its name from Satī, a name for the wife of Śiva, who self-immolated in anger at her father's snubbing of her husband.

satyāgraha: literally, "grasping for the truth." *Satyāgraha* was Gandhi's term for his philosophy and practice of nonviolent resistance to injustice.

shaman: originally a Siberian term, now used cross-culturally to refer to a kind of sacred figure who mediates between the human and spirit worlds and performs healings. The shaman's work often involves self-transformations and magical formulas.

Sikhism: an indigenous Indian religion inspired by Kabīr, a mystic-poet from Varanasi, and founded by Guru Nānāk, a Hindu from Punjab. Both men condemned Hindu and Muslim sectarianism and sought to establish authentic worship of the one true God. The name *Sikh* means "disciple."

smṛti: secondary sacred literature in Hinduism. Whereas *śruti* is literature of the highest authority, the authority of *smṛti* derives from *śruti*. *Smṛti* includes such popular texts as the *Purāṇas* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. *Smṛti* means "recollection" or "tradition."

śrāddha: funeral rituals and the ceremonies following the funeral.

śrauta ritual: ordinarily complex Vedic ceremonies using the verses of the Veda for the purpose of maintaining divine-human relations.

śruti: sacred literature of the highest authority in Hinduism. Believed to have been revealed to the ancient *rishis*, *śruti* includes the *Rig-veda* and the *Upaniśads*.

Śūdras: the lowest of the four *varnas*; the caste of peasants and servants.

sympathetic magic: the practice of attempting to affect realities by manipulation of objects or words representing those realities.

Tantra: an esoteric yogic practice involving the channeling of negative desires to the quest of enlightenment and liberation. Tantra is often associated with worship of the Goddess.

tapas: creative heat or ardor, manifested in the sacrificial fires and the body of a *tapasin*, a spiritual adept.

triloka: the Vedic conception of the world as tripartite, divided into heaven, atmosphere, and earth.

twice-born (*dvijas*): a term for members of the three upper castes, so called because they undergo a ritual initiation (*upanāyana*) or second birth.

upanāyana: the ritual that initiates study of the Veda and marks entry into studenthood for upper-caste members. The initiate is given a sacred *janneu* thread, worn over the left shoulder, to indicate his new status.

Upaniśads: Composed between 800–200 B.C.E., the *Upaniśads* represent an evolution in Vedic thought, bringing together speculation about the nature of the self and ultimate reality in the insight that Brahman and ātman are identical.

Vaidik dharma: the “religion of the Veda.” *Vaidik dharma* is the indigenous term that most closely approximates what is called Hinduism.

Vaiśnava: the religion of Vishnu.

Vaiśyas: the caste of farmers, cattle herders, artisans, and businesspeople.

varna: literally, “color” and usually rendered as “caste.” *Varna* designates the fourfold classification of Brāhmins, Kśatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras.

Veda: sacred wisdom believed to have been revealed to ancient *rishis*. The Veda is now the most sacred of Hindu scriptures. It comprises four *Samhitās*, or collections: the *Rig*, the *Yajur*, the *Sama*, and the *Artharva*.

Vedānta: the “end of the Veda.” Vedānta is one of the most important and influential of the Hindu philosophies. Deriving inspiration particularly from the *Upaniṣads*, the last part of the Veda, Vedānta emphasizes unity of the soul and the absolute.

Westernization: the process by which modern Western values, beliefs, and practices exert influence on non-Western cultures.

yantra: geometric design associated with the presence of the Goddess. A *yantra* is an aniconic image of the divine.

yoga: a discipline for the purposes of enlightenment and liberation. Yoga literally means “yoke.” In a narrower sense, yoga refers to a specific school of orthodox philosophy given classical expression in the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali.

yonī: the vulvic component of the *lingam/yonī*, representative of Śakti, divine female power.

Biographical Notes

Agni: the Vedic god of fire and mediator between human and divine realms. According to the Veda, Agni dwells in the fires of the hearth, the sacrifice, and cremation.

Akbar the Great (1542–1605): one of the most highly regarded Mughal emperors. Akbar was especially renowned for his toleration and patronage of non-Muslim religions.

Arjuna: one of the five sons of Pāndu in the *Mahābhārata*. Arjuna's dialogue with his charioteer Krishna comprises the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

A. C. Bhaktivedanta (1896–1977): Vaiṣṇava teacher who founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in 1966, inspired by the teachings of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, a fifteenth-century saint and religious reformer.

Bharāt Mātā: a manifestation of the Goddess as the land of India.

Bhudevī: a manifestation of the Goddess as Mother Earth.

Brahmā: one of the Hindu triad of cosmic deities. Brahmā creates the world, Vishnu sustains it, and Śiva destroys it when it has become decrepit. Brahmā then creates a new world from the raw materials of the previous universe.

Durgā: an autonomous manifestation of the Goddess whose victory over a buffalo-demon is celebrated in the Bengali *Durgā-pūjā* each year.

Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1947): leader of the Indian independence movement whose vision of liberation was deeply influenced by his Hindu piety and informed by his appreciation for many religious traditions.

Ganeśa: popular elephant-headed god of Hinduism. As the remover of obstructions, Ganeśa is often found atop doorways and thresholds throughout India.

Gangā: goddess who manifests as the river Ganges.

Gautama, Buddha (563–483 B.C.E.): Born Siddhartha Gautama in North India, he attained the title “Buddha,” which means “the awakened one,” at his enlightenment. His teachings initiated the Buddhist movement.

Gurū Nanak (1469–1539): originally a Hindu living in northwest India, Nanak had a vision of God while bathing that prompted him to establish the movement of disciples, or the Sikhs.

Indra: Vedic god of war and the rains. One quarter of the hymns of the *Rig-veda* are addressed to Indra, indicating his prominence in Āryan culture.

Kālī: the tremendous manifestation of the Goddess.

Krishna: one of the principal *avatāras* of Vishnu and central character in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Lalla (Lalleshwari): Kashmiri woman of the 14th century who left an unhappy marriage to wander about North India as an itinerant teacher and poet. Her religious verses are beloved in her native Kashmir.

Laxmī: goddess of good fortune and consort of Vishnu. She is also known as Śrī.

Manu: the ancestor of humanity who is reputed to have established the law codes that bear his name.

Pārvatī: one of the manifestations of the wife of Śiva. Also known as Umā.

Puruṣa: the primordial human being. According to a prominent creation myth of the *Rig-veda*, the world and society are created by the gods' sacrificial dismemberment of the Puruṣa's body.

Rādhā: consort of Krishna.

Ram Mohan Roy (1774–1833): founder of the Brahmo Samāj, Roy took a critical-appreciative view of Christianity and Western values. His movement sought to reform Hinduism by eliminating image veneration and the practice of *satī*.

Rāma: one of the principal *avatāras* of Vishnu and protagonist of the *Rāmāyana*.

Rudra: terrifying Vedic god known as the “Howler,” enemy of gods and humans alike. It is likely that Rudra was the prototype for the Hindu god Śiva.

Śakti: another name for the Goddess.

Dayananda Sarasvati (1824–1883): Swami Sarasvati disliked much that he saw in the popular Hindu practice of his day, especially *pūjā* and pilgrimage. He advocated a return to the singular authority of the Veda and founded the Ārya Samāj to promote his cause.

Śiva: one of the Hindu triad of cosmic deities. Brahmā creates the world, Vishnu sustains it, and Śiva destroys it when it has become decrepit. Śiva is one of the most paradoxical of the Hindu deities and the object of widespread worship throughout India.

Soma: Vedic god who manifests as a plant with hallucinogenic properties. Drinking Soma was an important feature of many Vedic rituals, enabling the participants to see the gods.

Sūrya: one of the Vedic sun deities.

Vāc: Vedic goddess of speech.

Vardhamana, Mahavira (540–468 B.C.E.): considered by Jains to be a “Tirthankara,” a ford-maker, he is thought to show the way to liberation from *samsāra*. His practice of absolute nonviolence has been immensely influential in India.

Varuna: Vedic *deva* who guards *Rita*, the cosmic and social order. Varuna is known as the “thousand-eyed one.”

Vishnu: one of the Hindu triad of cosmic deities. Brahmā creates the world, Vishnu sustains it, and Śiva destroys it when it has become decrepit. In his *avatāras* as Rāma and Krishna, Vishnu is one of the most widely worshipped Hindu gods.

Vivekananda (1863–1902): foremost disciple of the 19th-century saint Ramakrishna, Vivekananda created a sensation at the first Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. His speech at the Parliament marked the beginning of Hindus coming to the West to represent their religion. Vivekananda began a worldwide network known as the Vedanta Society.

Yama: the god of death.

Bibliography

An immense array of literature about Hinduism is available in English. Much of it is highly technical and of interest mainly to scholars. In my selections, I have sought to highlight some of the best works currently available and easily accessible for the serious beginning student of Hinduism.

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